

The Beginning of the Happily Ever After by Mileventhings

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Family, Friendship

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., J. Hopper, Mike W., Will B.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-12-01 14:28:43

Updated: 2018-01-15 00:15:35

Packaged: 2019-12-17 00:15:47

Rating: K

Chapters: 17

Words: 15,039

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: What happened that night after El closed the gate? Short answer: A lot.

1. Chapter 1

A/N I do not own Stranger Things or any of the characters. Please review!

Steve and the kids made it back to the Byers' house first. Which was a good thing too, it gave them time to clean up the mess Steve and Billy had made, and of course Steve got to deposit Billy's unconscious body at his front door. Then there was nothing for them to do but sit down and wait.

The tension was painful. The rush of adrenaline they felt when they succeeded in distracting the demodogs had long since worn off. They had no idea what happened to the others. El could have closed the gate while the Mind Flayer was still controlling Will. Will could be dead. Or maybe El wasn't able to close the gate. Or maybe she closed it but died after being thoroughly drained. Or they all could have been attacked by Demodogs. Nobody knew what was happening and not even Dustin had a sarcastic comment to add.

The door handle started to move. Everyone held their breaths to prepare themselves for the worst. Joyce, Jonathan and Nancy walked into the house, carrying Will's unconscious body. One of the boys let out a cry. Looking back, nobody knows who made that noise. It could have been any of them.

"He's ok! He's ok! He's just sleeping" Joyce announced in a breathy laugh. Everyone let out a huge sigh of relief. Mike ran to Nancy and hugged her. He didn't realise how worried he was about her until he saw her walk through the door in one piece. Joyce carried Will to his room and tucked him into bed.

"Are the others back yet?" Jonathan asked. Nobody answered. Nobody had to. The silence that had once again descended upon the room answered the question for him. Nancy whispered in Mike's ear, still holding him close, "She's strong, she'll be back, I promise" Mike felt somewhat reassured. Nancy wouldn't break a promise, or lie, not like he did. The only thing running through his brain was his broken promise to El that he made last year, promising her a normal life, the Snowball. He shouldn't have let her go, not the first time, and

certainly not the second time. If anything happened to her tonight it was all his fault. It was his job to protect her and keep her safe but he couldn't even...

The door started to open slowly again. Hopper walked through carrying El, mirroring the last group of returners exactly.

No one said a thing.

Hopper looked so preoccupied with his own thoughts he didn't even seem to realise there was eight other people in the room. All he saw was El.

Mike broke the silence.

"Is she...?"

He couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence.

"She fine, she's fine, just drained. Everyone get off the couch so I can put her down" Hopper snapped.

He gently lay her down on the couch.

For the final time that night, silence descended upon the room. But it was a different type of silence. It wasn't charged with fear and anticipation and dread. It was full of relief and hope and disbelief that everyone managed to pull off their plan with no more casualties.

Dustin started laughing. Very loudly. Hopper turned to look at him to tell him to can it, when he realised the same thing Dustin had. He started to laugh too. One by one, everyone started laughing. These laughs ranged from whole-hearted belly laughs from Dustin to giggles from Nancy to a tired smile from Joyce.

"What's so funny?" Came a voice from around the corner. Will had woken up and entered the living room. He looked weak, and exhausted, but for the first time in almost a year, he looked peaceful.

"We did it." Smiled Mike, talking more so to himself than anybody else.

"Thanks to every single son of bitch in this house, we actually did it. We're all alive!" Dustin cried.

Hopper tried to reprimand him, tried to shut him up as El was sleeping, but he didn't have the heart. "Let the kids have their fun," he thought "they deserve it."

2. Chapter 2

After the events of the evening had well and truly sunk in, everyone felt an intense wave of exhaustion, the weariness that had been building up since Will first went missing had overflowed. Nobody had the strength to even go home. Tonight was going to be a sleepover at The Byers'.

Pillows and blankets had been allocated to the whole gang. Joyce and Will slept in Joyce's room, Nancy, Jonathan, Steve and the party slept in the living room on the floor and El and Hopper slept in Will's room, Hopper on the ground. Well, that was the plan anyway.

Joyce and Will went to bed straight away. Everyone was dying to talk to Eleven, but she was still out cold. Joyce refused to let Will stay awake any longer, he needed to build up his strength.

Hopper carried El into Will's bed and arranged blankets on the floor. Even though there was no way in hell he was sleeping tonight. He was going to watch El all night and be there the second she woke up. Of course, this plan was flawed.

When Mike heard he had to sleep with the others in the living room while El slept in Will's room, he nearly threw an almighty fit. Mike told Hopper, fists clenched, trying to breath through his teeth and calm down, that there was no chance he was going to be sleeping tonight and under no circumstances would El wake up without Mike by her side.

Once Hopper realised how similar him and Mike were and thought of the crap the kid went through this year because of him, he couldn't really say no. Mike pulled up a chair and sat next to Will's bed, preparing for a long night.

Though all of Hopper's insincts screamed don't leave her again, he knew he had to let Mike have his time with her, even if she was asleep. For almost a year the poor kid didn't even know if she was alive. Hopper mentally added that to the list of reasons why he hated himself. So, even though it went against his better judgement, he let Mike stay there with El for the night, alone. Mike needed time to

absorb the events of the night by himself without sitting in an awkward silence with Hopper, both just watching El as she slept, for 7 hours.

So Hopper spent the night in Jonathan's room.

Mike held El's hand. Mike truly had the best intentions to stay up all night waiting for El to wake up. But some time around 4AM he nodded off.

About an hour or two later, Mike felt a gentle tug on his hand. His eyes snapped open immediately. El was slowly waking up.

"El, are you ok? Are you awake?" Mike whispered, hardly able to contain his excitement and relief.

El's big brown eyes opened and looked straight into Mike's. Mike could have cried.

El's face slowly started to light up when she realised who was sitting next to her.

"Mike?"

3. Chapter 3

Nancy, Jonathan, Steve and the party all got their blankets and pillows and made themselves comfortable on the living room floor. The window was smashed but it was an uncharacteristically warm night for the beginning of November, so the fresh breeze was appreciated by everyone. There were vines everywhere and the demo dog was still in the fridge but none of that mattered right now.

Nancy, Jonathan and Steve tried to get some sleep but that was proving difficult thanks to the violent whispering between Dustin, Lucas and Max.

"I can't believe it. This whole night was like something from a movie, not actual real life." Whispered Max incredulously.

"You get used to it." Replied Dustin.

"Seriously though, tonight was crazy. I was beginning to think Eleven and everything that happened last year was a weird dream." Lucas added.

"So, El. Tell me about her." Said Max

"I already told you everything, she has powers and can flip a v-"

"Yeah I know she can flip a van with her mind Lucas, but I mean, what's she like? Is she nice or funny or smart? Tell me about her"

Both boys were silent.

After a few minutes, Dustin was able to form a coherent answer.

"We don't really know what she's like. I mean, she's awesome, obviously, but we don't know what she likes or whether she's funny or not. The only one of us who really knew her was Mike."

"One thing we definitely know about her is that she's kind. Like superhero, sacrifice yourself for a stranger, kind. That's it I guess. But she's saved us all so many times that it's enough." Added Lucas.

Nancy, Jonathan and Steve, still feigning sleep so the kids could talk

somewhat in private, all looked at each other. It occurred to all three of them at the same time that this El girl was an actual person, not a weapon.

Nancy was shocked she didn't realise it before. She thought Mike was infatuated by her because she had weird science powers, she never realised that she must actually have a personality, likes and dislikes, and other than Hopper, Mike was the only one who really knew her. He didn't just like her because she came straight out of an X-Men comic, he liked El for El.

"This may be a stupid question but, why doesn't she like me? This may be really trivial or whatever, and I know it was a big, emotional night for her reuniting with everyone and she's shy and doesn't like strangers. But I don't know, I just felt like she really didn't like me" Max whispered shyly.

Dustin and Lucas looked at each other. They both had a hunch why El clearly did not like Max but neither wanted to say it. El and Max would be friends as soon as the misunderstanding was cleared up, they knew it.

"To be fair, I don't think she's ever met a girl her own age before." Lucas reasoned.

"Yeah, and like you said, she's shy! And she's really cool. Especially with her new look. Trust me, she did not look like that last year. She probably thinks she's too cool for you." Dustin interjected, trying to lighten the mood.

Max let out a little laugh. The teenagers looked at each other too. They could guess why El wasn't Max's biggest fan too.

After a long pause, the kids excitedly starting recapping the night's events to each other.

Steve had had enough.

"Listen you shitheads, if you don't all shut up right now, I won't be afraid to use my bat on all of you." Steve commanded.

The kids didn't feel particularly threatened by Steve, but considering

they were all exhausted anyway they figured they should save themselves the trouble of another argument with Steve, so they said goodnight and went to sleep.

The second the whispering stopped, Steve was out like a light. And started snoring. Loudly.

Nancy and Jonathan huddled up together, each in their own cocoon of blankets and silently laughed to each other about Steve's new found love of babysitting.

4. Chapter 4

A/n Thanks so much for everybody's kind reviews. There are still plenty more chapters to come!

"Eleven?!"

"Mike!"

El sat up in the bed as quick as she could but, considering that she was still quite weak, it wasn't actually that quick. The two kids hugged each other. They lost track of how long they stayed holding on to each other, just taking it all in. They eventually broke apart.

"You did it. You closed the gate. You saved us all. Again" Mike said with a gentle laugh.

El just smiled.

There was so much they wanted to say to each other, neither of them knew where to begin.

El told Mike about how she woke up in the Upside Down that night last November and went straight to Mike's house, but never went inside, knowing she would put him in danger if she did.

Mike listened with a nauseous stomach about how she lived in the woods for a few weeks before Hopper found her. The thought of El having to hunt for squirrels to eat in the freezing cold while Mike was safe and warm at his house, only 10 minutes away from her, made Mike feel like he was going to catch on fire. El was so close to him this whole year but he couldn't find her. What sort of a friend was he?

El could practically read his thoughts.

"It's not your fault" she said.

"I should have been there, I should have found you. Actually I should never have let you fight the Demogorgon in the first place, I should have protected you, I should have-"

"Breathe" El said, trying to calm down Mike. "It's ok now. We will be ok now"

They both looked at each other, smiling bashfully, realising how true that statement was. Everything was ok now.

A little while later they both decided it was time El properly got to meet everyone without the immediate threat of an inter-dimensional monster looming.

Mike helped El get out of bed. At this stage, her eyeshadow had rubbed off and her curls had broken free from the restraints of the hair gel.

Mike couldn't tear his eyes away from her curls. They were magnificent. Not that he said that to her. All this year, Mike dreamed of El coming back and being his girlfriend. Now that she was back, asking her to be his girlfriend didn't seem as urgent anymore. She was back. That's all that mattered. There would be plenty of time for everything else later.

Mike and El walked to the door of Will's bedroom, holding hands. El took a deep breath.

Time for a lot of explanations.

5. Chapter 5

At around 6 or 6.30am everybody started waking up. As tired as they all were, nobody was able to sleep very well. Nancy, Jonathan, Steve, Dustin, Lucas, Max, Joyce, Will and Hopper all went to the kitchen to get a bowl of cereal or a slice of toast. After everyone established that Will was well on his way to being his old, not possessed by an interdimensional monster, self, the kitchen was silent other than the sound of chewing or spoons scratching against bowls. There wasn't much else to say.

A little while later Mike and El walked out of Will's room, holding hands. Hopper groaned to himself. On one hand, he couldn't remember the last time he felt this happy, because he could see El was happy, healthy and most importantly, safe. On the other hand, was he really going to have to deal with El and Mike's preteen hormones now?

Apart from Hopper and his internal battle, the faces of everyone in the kitchen lit up watching El walk towards them, almost as good as new.

"Hi" El said as she reached the kitchen.

"ELEVEN!" Dustin and Lucas yelled, suffocating her in a hug.

"Guys be careful! Don't break her!" Mike yelled above their shouts. El just giggled.

A few minutes and a long hug between El and Hopper, and El and Joyce later, the noise in the house died down again. There was so much to say, but nobody knew where to start.

Joyce was not really in the mood for being the leader of a group therapy session but she knew if she didn't say something nobody would.

"Lets start from the start. What happened to you last November?" She asked El.

El told everybody what happened after the Demogorgan, how she met Hopper and where she has been since then, with the help of Mike and Hopper. She didn't tell anybody about Chicago yet, not even Mike. She wasn't ready.

Nancy, Joyce and Jonathan then told everybody what happened at Hopper's cabin last night.

Dustin, Lucas and Mike told everybody about Billy and what they did in the tunnels last night. Nancy yelled at Mike for being so stupid. Hopper had a few not so nice words to say to them as well. Joyce held her tongue as none of her children were involved and, at the end of the day, it all worked. It was a stupid thing to do, definitely, but it all worked out.

Steve wanted the ground to open up and swallow him whole after all the disapproving looks he was getting from the adults and the other teenagers.

Hopper told everyone what happened to him and El at the lab. He talked about Dr. Owens and about how El closed the gate. After a little while he had to stop talking as he was getting choked up thinking about how weak El looked last night after she closed the gate. It reminded him too much of Sara. He passed it off as a coughing fit so nobody would notice. But the way Joyce and El were looking at him, he knew he wasn't completely successful.

After all these long winded explanations, there was still one part of the story left. El knew it was time to tell everybody about where she was before she came to the Byers' house last night. It was time to tell everyone about Chicago. As she looked around the table, she looked into everyone's eyes. Everyone seemed a lot older than they actually were. Everyone seemed wise and weathered by their experiences. Even though El hadn't even talked to some of these people before, she knew they were all connected. They were all more than friends. They were family.

And if friends don't lie, family definitely doesn't lie.

6. Chapter 6

"Before I came here... I went to see Mama" El started

"What?"

"Where?"

"How ?"

"You have a mom?!", the party shouted.

This was where Joyce and Hopper stepped in. They told everyone how they met Terry Ives last year when they were looking for Will and what Becky told them about Eleven and the lab.

Everyone was totally stunned by this new information, though it wasn't the first time in the last 24 hours that they were this shocked.

El continued her story about how she went to see Terry, about what Terry showed her and about how she ran away from their house.

"Wait there's more of you? More people with powers?" asked Lucas

"Why would they start at number 11? Of course there's more! This is so awesome" Dustin said, so excited he could hardly contain himself.

The teenagers and the adults were speechless. More people like Eleven? More people went through what she and her mother had to go through in the lab?

"And you came back here after that, right El?" Mike asked, with a hopeful look in his eyes. He could tell El was having trouble telling the story, not just because talking a lot was hard for her, and for her sake, he wanted it to be over. But he could tell it wasn't. He knew there was something else she hadn't said yet, something she didn't want to say. And it broke Mike's heart.

"No. I went to Chicago. To find my sister." El replied slowly.

This was new information for Hopper. He was still angry she ran

away from the cabin in the first place and had no idea how this story would end.

El told everyone about Kali and her friends. And what they did to the bad men. And how she almost did it too.

"And I was there, in his home and I nearly killed him. I wanted to kill him. He deserved to die for what he did to Mama. And me. And Kali. I wanted to so much. But I... I couldn't do it. He has kids. He is somebody's Papa. I couldn't do it. And I didn't want Kali to do it... I don't know why"

El started crying silent tears. If you listened carefully to the silence in the kitchen, you actually hear everybody's hearts breaking listening to this story. Everyone's face was tear- streaked, excepting nobody.

"That's your conscience. It wouldn't let you kill him." Nancy said slowly, one of the only people who were physically able to speak after that story.

"What's a conscience?"

"It's the little voice at the back of your head that tells you when you're doing something bad. It means you are a good person El. You saved all of us in this room. You saved that man who didn't deserve to be saved." Joyce added, walking to El and holding her head and rubbing the tears off her cheeks with her thumbs.

"Don't cry honey, you are a **good** person."

"But I've killed bad men before. I must be a monster" El whispered.

"That's because they were going to hurt you, and us! You only killed them because you had to, to protect yourself. That doesn't mean you're a monster, that just means you can't kill anyone unless you have to. Which is a good thing! I promise." Smiled Mike, still holding one of El's hands.

El just smiled at him. She felt lighter and more unburdened than she had ever felt before. This must be what fully happy felt like.

Will spoke up for the first time."What happened after that?"

"Police came and we ran. I could feel you needed me so I came home."

"You could feel it? How?"

El and Will made full eye contact while both being conscious and in the same dimension, for the first time ever. It was clear they had a lot to talk about. But there would be time for that later. There would be time for everything later.

"Actually never mind, it doesn't matter." Will retracted, realising they shouldn't get into all of this in front of everyone.

El and Will discreetly mouthed to each other "Later."

"So is that it? Anymore secrets?" Hopper interrogated El, and everybody else in the room too.

El nodded.

"I think that's it. I think we're all up to speed." Joyce said and everyone agreed. "It's only 8 o'clock so I'm going to go back to bed and try to get some more sleep. You can all stay here for as long as you want, but everyone please call your parents and tell them where you are. We don't need anymore missing kids."

7. Chapter 7

A/N I know this chapter is even shorter than usual because wasn't even planning on writing it but I realised Mama Steve deserves some love.

After Joyce went back to bed, Steve decided he should head home. But first he had something to say to someone.

"Hey Jonathan, can we talk?"

Jonathan looked surprised but he nodded slowly.

"Just be good to her ok? Be a better boyfriend than I was."

"I will." Jonathan smiled.

"So are we cool?" Steve asked.

"Sure."

And just like that, the small, silent feud between Steve and Jonathan that had lasted years, long before Nancy, had ended. Not that they would ever be best friends, but they had been through too much together to resent each other as much as they used to, just because one of them was popular and one was a loner.

"Wait, Steve where are you going?" Nancy stopped him as he started to leave.

"I think I should go, you and Jonathan are happy and nobody here needs me anymore. I'm just intruding."

"Ok. I'll see you later I guess. And I just want to say thanks again for everything you did for the kids. Things could have ended a lot differently if you weren't there. So thanks."

"Any time." Steve winked.

"Wait, wait, wait! You're leaving?" Dustin interrupted.

"Yeah kid, my work here done"

"But-"

"Look if you ever need me, you know where I live."

"Pfftt, why would I need you?" Dustin scoffed.

"Girl trouble, hair trouble, monster hunting trouble-"

"Ok" he laughed "I get it"

"Seriously kid, I'll deny it if you ever tell anyone, but I kinda had fun today. So if you ever need like, a big brother or something, I'm here."

"Ok" Dustin giggled.

Steve opened the door and started to walk out when he was approached by the other kids.

"Steve, I always thought you were a douche but you were actually pretty cool last night. So thanks." Mike said.

"And thanks for stopping Billy last night, who knows what would have happened if you didn't." Lucas added.

"I'm sorry about Billy by the way. I'm sorry you got hurt but I think he'll stay away from you from now on." smiled Max.

"No problem shitheads. Just doing my job" laughed Steve, turning his head away from the kids quickly. He didn't want them to see his eyes water. He'd never had anybody who needed him or who looked up to him before. It felt weird, but it made him feel him feel better than he could ever remember feeling.

He walked out the door and was about to shut it when he heard one more shout.

"I swear kid if you spill anything that happened last night to anyone, you'll have me to deal with." yelled Hopper.

Some things never change.

8. Chapter 8

While all the teenagers and kids went to say goodbye to Steve, Hopper talked to El in the kitchen.

She mentally prepared herself for the lecture Hopper would inevitably give her, as she hadn't told him the full story about Terry Ives and Chicago when they drove to the lab last night.

"So are you sure that's the whole story?" asked Hopper.

El was confused. Why wasn't he yelling at her? She broke all their rules. Including his Don't Be Stupid Rules and her Friends Don't Lie rule. Why was he so calm?

El answered Hopper hesitantly, "I'm sure."

"Ok. If it was any other night, you and I would start screaming at each other because of all of this. But just this once, I'll let you off the hook. And it's only because... when you closed that gate last night, jeez, you were incredible, kid. You really were. I'm so **proud** of you."

El turned pink.

"And I see that you learnt your lesson the hard way when you went to Chicago, and I don't see you going back there any time soon. So you go have some fun with your friends. You deserve it. I'm just sorry it took this long for you to meet them again."

"It okay." El smiled. Even though she wasn't going to be able to forget how long she waited for this reunion any time soon. But everything was ok now.

"And are you sure you're ok after everything that happened with your sister and seeing Brenner and everything? Do you want to talk about anything?"

"I'm sure"

"Ok then I guess-"

"I'm sorry" El blurted.

"For what?" Hopper was genuinely confused.

"I'm sorry for breaking the rules, for messing the cabin, for everything" El ran into Hopper's arms for a hug.

Hopper froze. He could hardly remember the last time he hugged a child, apart from when a rage-filled Mike collapsed in his arms last night.

He wrapped his arms around El.

"That's ok kid, it's ok now" he whispered in her ear as he rubbed her back in circles.

She raised her head and her big brown eyes, filling with water, looked straight into Hopper's.

"You're not like Papa. You are so much better."

Hopper's heart melted in his chest. He could feel his eyes fill with water too, so, in an effort to regain some dignity, he broke away from the hug and changed the subject.

"You know you're still going to have to hide the cabin for a little while longer, right?"

"How long is a little longer?" asked El, slyly.

"I don't know, I'll talk to Dr. Owens and see what he says, after everything calms down."

"Does that mean I can't see friends?" El started to realise the implications of spending another "little while longer" in the cabin.

"Well... since everybody knows about you anyway, maybe I'll be able to drop some of them to the cabin for a few hours every couple of days. I'll be able to make sure we're not being followed. Of course, unless you don't want to see your friends anymore-"

El ran in to his arms for another hug.

Hopper realised to himself that he could get used these hugs.

Hopper also remembered the other problem on his hands. Mike.

But he figured he could save that lecture for another time.

He watched as that kid, Steve, walked out of the Byers' house and remembered something.

"I swear kid if you spill anything that happened last night to anyone, you'll have me to deal with." he yelled.

9. Chapter 9

A/n This is by far my longest chapter yet, I hope you all still enjoy it! And thanks so much for all the kind reviews, it means so much to me and I can't tell you how much I appreciate the support!

After Hopper's conversation with El, he realised how exhausted he was. Staying awake all night worrying about El probably wasn't the wisest decision, he figured. He also figured that he should give El some time alone with her friends, especially if she was going to have to spend the next few months back in the cabin. So, he decided to go back to Jonathan's room to see if he could get some sleep.

Nancy and Jonathan sat at the kitchen table across from each other, holding hands, seemingly having a serious conversation.

Dustin looked around at all six party members and decided it was time for a proper reunion.

"I think I speak on behalf of everyone here when I say, Welcome to the party, to our two new, official, members." Dustin announced.

Mike squeezed El's hand and she smiled back at him. She looked around the group and her gaze landed on Max. El's face fell. She had forgotten about the girl.

Max saw how El looked at her and figured now was as good a time as any to have some one-on-one time with her. She also figured that if El liked her, Mike would stop being so hostile to her.

"Hey guys, can I have a minute alone with El? You know, new member-to-new member?" Max asked the group.

El's face was hard to read. She seemed surprised, and also angry, that Max wanted to talk to her. Max couldn't understand why.

"Yeah sure"

"Go right ahead" Lucas and Dustin smirked, guessing the content and outcome of this conversation. They walked to the other side of the

living room to give the girls privacy, picturing a few more windows being shattered telekinetically in the near future. Will followed close behind.

Mike didn't move.

"Hey paladin! Wanna give us some space?"

Mike blushed, realising he was still holding El's hand.

"Is that ok El?" he asked.

She slowly nodded, still looking confused.

"I'll be right over there if you need me." And with that, Mike joined the others at the other side of the room, who were already having a very deep and animated conversation about something or other.

"Like I said last night, my name is Max. Lucas told me what you did last year, and I heard what you did last night. You're amazing. Really cool. And I figured, since we're both in the party now, we should be friends. The boys are idiots, we need to stick together. I mean, if you want.." Max stopped talking after realising she was rambling.

"No." replied El coolly.

"What? What do you mean 'no'?"

"I don't want to be friends."

Now Max was confused. What had she done wrong?

"In my experience, you can never have too many friends..." Max smiled, trying to seem nice. "Maybe I came on too strong?" she wondered to herself.

"No" El repeated.

Max couldn't take it. After Mike refusing her friendship all week and now this, Max was done being rejected.

"Why not? Seriously. What did I do to you to make you hate me?"

El realised Max seemed sad. El didn't know what to do. She didn't know how to explain why she didn't like Max, she didn't have the right words. But El remembered how she felt last year. She was lucky Mike wanted her around, but how many times had the boys wanted to get rid of her? She remembered how bad that felt. She didn't want to make Max feel like that, even if El didn't want to be her friend.

"I'm sorry." El tried to choose her words carefully.

"I'm trying so hard but I- Wait what? Why are you sorry?" The last twenty-four hours had been very confusing for Max.

"I'm sorry for making you sad..."

"No, wait, don't feel bad, you didn't make me sad. Or maybe you did. Whatever. Why don't you like me? Is it because you're not use to girls? Or you're shy?" Max was having trouble finding the right words too.

"You and Mike are friends. And that makes me... sad."

"Trust me, Mike doesn't **not** want me to be his friend. And why would it make you sad even if we were friends?"

El spoke slowly, choosing each word very carefully, "You are pretty and have long hair. You can go outside and go to school and you aren't a freak and-"

"Hold up. Are you jealous?" Max had never been more confused in her life.

"What is 'jealous'?"

"It's this feeling you get when someone has something that you want. Your stomach gets tight, and you're furious and devastated at the same time. And you don't know how to make it stop."

El stopped to think before she replied to Max. She definitely had all those symptoms.

"Yes. I think I'm... jealous"

"**You're** jealous of **me**? You have superpowers! You are by far the coolest person I know, and I don't even know you! How could you be jealous of me?"

"I went to see Mike one day. You and him were happy. And I was ..jealous-"

"So you messed with my board! With your mind! Oh my God that's awesome! I mean, it wasn't awesome at the time, and I should have known something was wrong- I never fall off like that. But that's awesome." exclaimed Max.

El giggled at Max's excitement, despite her own jealous feelings towards her.

"I'm sorry." El tried to apologise for her outburst of anger in the school.

"Don't be! Seriously, that's THE coolest thing that has ever happened to me."

The laughter that the girls shared faded away.

"So can we be friends now?" pleaded Max.

El was still unconvinced, and it was written all over her face.

Max was about to say something when Lucas said something across the room that made the other boys laugh. Max's eyes never left Lucas. Suddenly everything was clear to El.

"You like Lucas. Not like a friend." El said. She spoke this as a statement, not a question.

Max's face turned a deep crimson colour.

"What? Uhhmm... what? Haha. No. Not like that. He's my friend. We're friends, just friends". stuttered Max.

El didn't believe her.

"Do you like Mike? More than friends?" she tried again.

"Ugh gross, no way. Not at all." Max declared, with a lot more conviction.

El realised she had no reason to reject Max's offer of friendship. She knew from the way Max and Lucas looked at each other that they were like her and Mike. Besides, Mike spent all last night at El's bedside, not Max's. She had no reason to be jealous. Mike and Max were like El and Lucas. Just friends.

It also occurred to El that if she was going to have to stay in the cabin a little longer, she should make as many friends as possible, so she could have lots of visitors. And it was fun laughing with Max. She was clearly very easily excited by El's "superpowers".

"Do you promise you and Mike are just friends?" asked El.

"Oh my God, I promise! I don't like Mike, I swear. He doesn't even want me to be his friend."

"Ok."

"Ok what?"

"I want to be friends" smiled El.

Max was so happy she could burst. How did she get so lucky? She made so many great friends within a few days of moving to Indiana. She never had friends like these in California.

And now that she and El were friends, maybe Mike would accept her too.

She looked over at Mike and saw him staring at El, a huge smile plastered across his face. She had only known him for a week and she could already see that he was lighter and happier this morning than he had been in a long time. And she could tell it was because El was back.

She turned back to El to say something and saw that El was staring right back at Mike, wearing the same stupid smile as him. A thought occurred to Max.

This was why El was jealous. El saw Mike and her together and she thought she was being replaced. Well, that couldn't be farther from the truth. And that's why El asked about Lucas. She could tell Max and Lucas liked each other in the same way she and Mike did.

"Deal. Let's be friends." Max smiled and extended her hand for El to shake. Second time lucky, she thought to herself.

El shook her hand and both of the girls smiled at each other, at a new friend. They also promised each other that the contents of this conversation would remain secret to everyone else.

This was the beginning of an epic, badass female friendship, that no jealousy or boy- trouble could ruin.

A/n Girls support girls.

10. Chapter 10

Mike was surprised when Max said she wanted to talk to El alone, and slightly nervous. What if El realised she would be happier with a group of girl friends instead of the party? And Max didn't know El- she might say the wrong thing and set her off. Mike asked if El was ok having this private talk with Max, praying she would say no. But of course, she nodded her head yes.

Mike reluctantly joined Lucas, Dustin and Will by the couch. Lucas and Dustin were laughing hysterically and Will was smiling, with a worried look in his eyes.

"What's so funny?" asked Mike.

"Nothing!" All three boys answered immediately, each looking guilty. They knew Mike wouldn't appreciate the joke.

"Seriously, what were you laughing about?"

The boys didn't answer. After a few seconds of Mike staring intensely at all of them, Will cracked.

"Dustin and Lucas were betting on how long it would take El to use her powers against Max." he blurted.

"What?"

"Hey!"

"Why would you tell him?"

Mike, Lucas and Dustin yelled respectively.

"El and Max are in the party now! We can't bet on how long it will take them to fight!" Mike chastised.

"Hey, we make bets on ourselves all the time, betting on them has nothing to do with their party membership."

defended Lucas.

"And we all know this 'one-on-one talk' can't end well." Dustin added.

"Why not?" Mike was genuinely confused.

Lucas explained, "Man, you didn't see them when they met last night, Max introduced herself and El just walked straight past her!"

"It was cold" agreed Dustin.

"Well El isn't great with strangers, we knew that!"

"Yeah but this was something else.."

Lucas continued.

"Do you think she's jealous because she's not the only girl?" Dustin wondered out loud.

"Actually about that, who put you in charge of deciding on new members? We never took a vote on Max!" complained Mike

"We never took a vote on El either..."

"What, so you want to kick El out of the party?"

"No! Nobody is being kicked out of the party! But after everything Max went through with us last night, she's one of us now. So is El. They both are."

"What do you think Will?" Mike noticed he was quiet during this argument.

"I think they should both be members. I think it's the right thing to do."

Mike let out a long groan. He knew Max was one of them now, there was no denying it. If this happened yesterday, before El came back, Mike would not have given up so easily. But now that El was here, he didn't want to waste time on stupid arguments. And he had to admit, Max was pretty incredible last night.

After a long pause he issued his final verdict. "Ok, El and Max both

stay."

All four boys looked at each other and smiled. They were thrilled that these two amazing girls were their friends now and that Will was ok. Everything seemed perfect on the surface. But there was a bittersweet taste in their mouths.

It would never really be the four of them anymore. Of course they will still be best friends, and they'll hang hang out, just the four of them, but things will be different. Max and El will be with them most of the time. It won't just be the four party founders anymore. It will be different.

There is also the fact that most of the boys were developing romantic feelings for the girls. If a miracle occurs and they get girlfriends, they will go on adventures together, not as a group. All of the boys will grow up and leave the party behind.

And next year they'll be in high school. Obviously they still have plenty of time to grow up and mature, but as the four boys sat together, realising two girls just joined the party, it seemed like the end of an era. It was the beginning of the end of their childhood.

After a pause charged with thoughts, Dustin felt the need to address the next topic of business.

"So, is El officially your girlfriend now or something?"

Mike's face turned 500 different shades of red and he felt like the wind was knocked out of him. "What? No! Ha! Wwwwwhy would you think that?"

"Because you slept in her room last night instead of with us"

"I bet he didn't even sleep, just stayed awake making sure she was still alive"

" So what? I hadn't seen her in a year and then when she came back, she had to close the interdimensional gate with her mind. Sorry that I was worried about her!" Mike defended.

"Is she ok?" Will piped up.

"Yeah. I think so. It's hard to tell with her." Mike said slowly.

The girls started to giggle across the room and the four boys turned to look at them.

"Damn, they like each other. Is it bad that I was kinda looking forward to a fight?" complained Dustin.

All the boys, including Mike, laughed.

Silence fell on the group once more.

A thought occurred to Mike . "You never properly met El" he said to Will.

Will nodded his head. He hadn't forgotten about the agreement he made with El to talk about everything by themselves later.

"Is she going to hate me the way she used to hate Max?" Will was slightly nervous about their meeting.

"No, I don't think so.."

"Nah probably not"

"Maybe"

The boys all replied simultaneously.

"Great" Will thought to himself.

"So, how awesome was last night? I know it was terrifying and Bob died, but it was sooo awesome." said Dustin.

"Really?" Will asked.

"Yeah definitely! And the demodogs were all around the house and we were screwed but then El came and killed them all, and she flung one through that broken window. It was pretty awesome." added Mike.

"And when Billy came, I think I shit myself. But then Steve and him started fighting and Steve was winning but then Billy broke a plate

on his head and then Steve was losing real bad and then Max stuck the syringe in Billy's neck and he blacked out. It was the most awesome I've ever seen that didn't involve super powers." continued Lucas.

The recount of Billy and Steve's fight last night made the boys howl with laughter.

Lucas noticed that Max was staring at him from across the room. They both smiled at each other and turned pink. Mike watched this exchange. He knew Lucas and Dustin both liked Max but he didn't think it was serious. He thought they just wanted girlfriends and that Max seemed pretty cool.

Only now, looking at Lucas and Max, did he realise that they actually really liked each other. They liked each other the same way that Mike liked El, and the way that Mike hoped El liked him back.

That meant he could also tell that Dustin's feelings for Max were as shallow as he originally figured. But that didn't mean that Dustin wouldn't be crushed when he found out how Lucas and Max felt about each other.

As he listened to Lucas, Dustin and Will talk a million miles an hour about other events that occurred last night, a realisation hit him. El would get to have a normal life. She might even go to school with him. They'll be able to have a normal relationship where they'll be able to see each other, and talk, and kiss, all the time.

Mike and El caught each other's gaze from across the room and they both just smiled. He couldn't wait for her 'normal' life to start.

11. Chapter 11

After Steve left, Nancy and Jonathan sat down at the kitchen table together.

Once a few minutes of silence had passed, listening to the kids talk in the background, Jonathan decided he should say something.

"So... Are you and Steve-

"-Officially over." Nancy finished his sentence.

The two teenagers smiled at each other.

"Things hadn't felt right for a while. Bad timing." she continued.

"And what kind of timing do we have?"

"A good kind, I think. I want it to be good."

"Me too."

The two held hands over the table. Jonathan kept averting his gaze. It was like he thought if he looked at her too much she'd disappear, or he would wake up from a dream.

"So are we... like...doing this now?" Jonathan spoke, struggling to find the right words.

"Doing what?" Nancy asked, pretending to be oblivious.

"You know... like... you know"

"Know what?" said Nancy, clearly seeing that he was struggling but had no intention of helping him. She wanted him to say it out loud.

"Are we dating now?" He blurted.

"Hmmm, I don't know, are we?" She toyed.

"Do you want to be? I mean, do you want to be dating. I mean... will you just put me out of my misery and be my girlfriend?"

With a laugh, Nancy leaned in and kissed him.

"Does that answer your question?" She whispered against his mouth.

After a minute or so of kissing, they remembered all the kids were just around the corner in the next room, including their little brothers. So they resigned to just holding hands.

"Are you ok? You know, after last night with Will... I know you didn't want to talk about it last night and if you still aren't ready, that's fine, I just want to make sure you're ok.." Nancy asked Jonathan.

"Yeah I'm ok. I think. It was intense. But I've haven't really been thinking about myself. After what happened to Bob, I'm just worried about my mom.." he said, looking at the locked door of Joyce's bedroom.

"She's tough. And strong. After everything she's been through this past year, she'll be able to get through this too. I swear." She looked into his eyes, hoping she was reassuring him. She had no idea what would happen to Joyce but she hoped for everyone's sake she would be able to work through this.

"Do you think Will seems ok?" Nancy asked.

"I think so. I mean, look at him. I can't remember the last time he looked as free as he does now." said Jonathan, watching Will laughing with his friends. "What about Mike?"

"We were both so sad all year, you know? But he seems better now." she said with a smile.

"Is it because of her?" Jonathan was talking about Eleven.

"Yeah it must be. It's weird, it's like they need each other or something. But they're so young to be so serious... And besides, not to be mean, but she's not the most normal girl to in a healthy relationship with.."

"Maybe that's why he likes her. Because she's not normal. And you've gotta admit, she is pretty cool" Jonathan smiled.

"But what if things go wrong between them? It's not like she has a lot of friends to fall back on if they break up. And what if he realises once he spends more time with her that she's not so cool after all? After everything she's been through maybe she wouldn't be able to handle a break up."

Suddenly it was very clear that Jonathan and Nancy were not talking about Mike and El anymore.

"Is that how you feel?" Jonathan asked.

"I don't know, I want to give this a try, but Steve and I were together for almost a year, and we **just** broke up. And after everything that happened this I don't know if I'm ready to jump into this. What if we broke up and we weren't friends anymore? I don't know if I could take losing one more person. I really like you but once we start dating you'll realise I'm not as great as you think."

"You're better. We've been through all these crazy life- threatening adventures together, and survived them. I think we can handle a relationship. And trust me, I know you. And you're amazing. Everything about you is amazing. And I'm lucky to even just be your friend. And if we did break up, I'll always want to be your friend. Because I can't lose you. And I swear to you, you will never lose me."

Nancy looked at Jonathan. She knew big speeches like this were hard for him. Slowly she leaned in to kiss him.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Jonathan whispered.

"Just shut up and kiss me you weirdo"

12. Chapter 12

After Max and El's heart-to-heart, they joined the boys on the sofa at the other side of the living room. There was a light conversation between Max, Lucas and Dustin. El, Will and Mike stayed relatively silent during this. They didn't know how to talk about the heavy stuff yet. And everybody had questions for everybody and nobody had any answers. The biggest question on everyone's minds was, "What now?"

This small talk was cut short by Nancy.

"Mike, I'm calling Mom and you're gonna have to talk to her too. We need to make up a story to explain why neither of us have been home in days."

"Fine" Mike replied. He got up and followed Nancy to the phone.

"Don't forget to give your parents a call either" Nancy told the rest of the party.

"Oh shit!" cried Lucas as he remembered he never told his mom he was going to spend the night at Will's house.

"I'm totally screwed!" yelled Dustin. Lucas, Dustin and Max ran to the phone to call their respective parents when Mike and Nancy were done talking to their mom.

That left El and Will alone on the couch. Neither child said anything for a few minutes listening to the distressed sounds coming from the direction of the phone.

"So..." Will began, "where do we start?"

El smiled. "The start. What do you want to know?"

"Is this the end? Of all of it? Is it finally over?" he asked, not meeting her eyes. He was afraid of what she might say.

"Maybe" she said with a shrug. Her reply carried more weight than it seemed and Will could tell. He could tell she desperately wanted it to be over, and she was fairly confident that it was, but she couldn't be

sure.

"You're ok now?" El asked.

"I feel about as great as you do." Will joked. Anyone with eyes could see how pale and exhausted they looked, how they looked wise beyond their years and like they have lived decades longer than they actually have. Anyone could see the purple patches under their eyes and that their eyes were cloudy and haunted.

El understood the joke and replied with a laugh.

"How did you know what was happening to me?" he asked.

"I can find people.." El was struggling to find the words to illustrate her reply. "... in my head. Between here and Upside Down. I can see you there. I can see you sick there."

Her minimal explanation made perfect to Will. He suddenly remembered talking to her in that place when he was in the Upside Down last year.

"I met you in the halfway place last year, didn't I? I was in the Upside Down but we talked to each other."

El nodded with a sad smile.

"Now that that thing is out of me, I won't have any flashes of the Upside Down anymore, right?" Will pleaded.

"Right..." she hesitated.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Maybe... bad dreams"

Both were silent for a little bit.

"I had nightmares all this year. Of the Upside Down and the monster and being trapped... I thought I would die there." Will said, more so to himself than to El. So she just listened.

"I had some nightmares last night but they were different to the ones I've had before. They were just dreams, it was just happening in my head, not actually happening. It was still awful and I felt sick when I woke up, but if that's all it is then it'll be ok." Will reasoned with himself. As long as the dreams were just happening in his head, he could handle it.

Then he remembered something. "When I get nightmares my Mom hears and she runs into my room. Who knows how long I'll keep having nightmares for. She'll be worried sick and I really don't want to put her through anything else... I think I'll always have them. For the rest of my life. I don't think they'll ever go away." Will realised how much he just confessed to a virtual stranger and stopped talking.

"Me too" El replied quietly. "I don't think the bad dreams will go away. But I don't want to make Hopper sad."

"How about this. Every week we meet up, just us to talk about the things that the others won't understand. And when we get bad dreams, instead of screaming and crying, we tell each other what happened. We help each other without making other people worried or making ourselves seem crazy."

"Yes"

And just like that, it was settled. A tradition of talking to each other every week, without fail, about what they've gone through was created, a tradition that lasted over twenty years into the future. But that comes later.

For now, even though they had so much to ask and tell each other, the promise of a weekly catch up was enough. No one else in the world could understand exactly what they had gone through, to be honest, even they couldn't understand exactly what the other had gone through. So with some smiles and a quick hand squeeze, they left the issue alone. There would be plenty petrifying nightmares to discuss and dissect in the coming days, weeks, years, but right now, they could be happy. They would be happy.

Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Max rejoined El and Will in a matter of minutes. There was still a certain awkwardness lingering in the air

but it was not as suffocating as it had been before. That awkwardness would soon diffuse too and a real friendship between six kids, who had gone through life-changing events together, could begin.

13. Chapter 13

A/n Sorry that the updates are becoming less frequent! I'm going to try and keep updating as often as I can. Thanks again to everyone for reading and for all the kind reviews and I hope everyone had happy holidays! Remember, the story is far from over! I have a lot more chapters planned. Sorry this chapter is kind of short: /

Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Max returned to El and Will after they called their respective parents. It seemed like they all got an earful from their mothers. Dustin was making jokes but Max looked a little pale. The definition of "getting an earful from your parents" meant different things to different people, apparently.

Suddenly the conversation between the six kids became insuppressible. They talked about everything and nothing all at the same time. Everything, except the heavy stuff.

No one had brought up things like El's childhood in the lab or the exorcism of whatever was possessing Will yet or Mike's neglectful father or Max's difficult family life but they didn't need to just then. There would be plenty time for the depressing things some other day but they had all been through so much last night that they craved meaningless, light-hearted conversation. Eventually the conversation lulled.

A sound that resembled a whale mating call was emitted from Dustin's stomach.

Everyone laughed so hard that they were nearly rolling around on the ground. Not that Dustin's tummy grumble was particularly funny, but because it was ok to laugh now. There was no imminent death sentence above anyone's heads anymore. So everything seemed hilarious.

"What? It's 10 o'clock! I haven't eaten in three hours!" Dustin yelled over the laughter.

The group erupted in laughter once more.

"Screw this. I'm getting some food" Dustin declared, heading to the kitchen.

"Yeah, me too." said Max, following Dustin.

El didn't know how to say she was hungry too and the only person who could read her mind, Mike, was already engaged in another, seemingly private, conversation with Will.

Lucas got up to follow Max and Dustin but when he looked back he saw El, looking lost. He knew he had a grudge against her last year and he wanted to prove to her that this grudge was in the past. He wanted to show El that Mike wasn't the only one in the group she could trust. He wanted El to feel like she could join him, Dustin and Max in the kitchen without having to be formally invited. She was in the party now, and he had to be the one to prove it.

"Hey El" he called.

El looked up at him.

"Wanna get something to eat?"

She nodded with a big smile and followed him to the kitchen. She was so happy to find that she actually belonged with the boys and Max, she felt it. She could tell they felt it too.

14. Chapter 14

When Dustin, Max and Lucas got up to get some food, Mike intended to go with them. But when he looked to his left he saw Will.

Will seemed to be in a world of his own. There's was no doubt that he was acting more like himself this morning than he had in a long time, but Mike was heart broken because of how weak and exhausted he looked. Just like El. But since Mike knew that El was all he was going to be able to think about for the foreseeable future, he felt he owed it to Will to make sure he was ok too. After everything last night, from being a spy to the demodogs to Bob to the exorcism, Mike definitely felt like he should check up on Will.

"You ok?" he asked Will.

Will snapped out of his daydream. He was still thinking about how great it was that he'll have someone like El in his life to talk to about the weird stuff, someone who would get it without thinking he was a crazy person. Then he remembered something.

To some extent, Mike gets it too. Just last week, Mike was who he went to when he had to talk about this stuff. And Mike helped him all week, even though it was a week from hell. He owed Mike a heartfelt thank you, what Mike went through because of him was terrifying, but Mike stuck with Will anyway.

"Yeah, I think so. Or at least, I will be." Will answered.

"That's good."

An awkward silence filled the space.

"I was so scared. I was talking to you last night, but it wasn't really you. It was some monster take had taken over your body and it was all my fault. And I'm sorry."

"What? How was what happened your fault?" Will asked, genuinely confused.

"Because I should have protected you and stopped the shadow

monster before anything bad happened. Even last year, I should have stopped the demogorgan, I should have found you sooner, I'm the paladin, president of the AV club. But I couldn't help you when you needed it and I'm sorry."

"Don't you get it? You did help me! In the shed last night when you were talking about the memories. Last year when you found El. When went down into the tunnels last night. You were helping me. You've been helping me all along."

"Really?"

"Definitely."

The two boys shared a smile.

Mike looked at the others in the kitchen and saw El had joined them. It made him so happy to see her being part of the group.

"You were right, you know" Will interrupted Mike's thoughts.

"Right about what?"

"El is pretty awesome."

They both laughed as they watched random cupboards in the kitchen open without being touched. "I tried to tell you!"

"And thanks for everything. Everything. I need to say thank you to everyone here, for everything they've done for me, but you most of all. You could have ran away screaming when I told you about the flashes of the Upside Down. But you didn't. You didn't think I lost my mind. And you did absolutely everything you could to help me. So I can never thank you enough and-"

Mike interrupted Will's speech with a hug.

"Let's just call it even." Mike said after the hug, extending his arm to Will.

"Deal." Will answered, shaking Mike's hand.

"Now I'm starving, and I'll be honest, you look terrible. So let's get some food. Maybe you'll start looking like a human again." Mike teased.

With a few more laughs and some more good-humoured teasing, Will and Mike joined the others in the kitchen.

15. Chapter 15

After over an hour longing for sleep, Joyce accepted that it was not going to come and opened her eyes. As much as she was exhausted and needed sleep, it wasn't really about that. She needed an escape, something to take her mind off everything.

Several things went round in circles in her head, competing for her attention. Will's face in that hospital bed. Will's voice in the shed. Will's strength and violence in the cabin, she could still feel his hands around her neck. Everything Will has been through this year. Waking up that morning last year to find him missing. Will. And of course, Bob...

But she couldn't think about those things anymore. It would drive her crazy. And yet it was all she seemed to think about.

And as much as she craved an escape from these thoughts, she knew she would feel incredibly guilty if such an escape was possible. Bob deserved to be thought about. He was a hero and Joyce found herself caught between a mental tug-of-war with herself, either think about Bob and feel terrible, or not think about Bob for a little while and feel extra terrible afterwards.

Part of the reason she came into her room after the whole group got caught up on what happened was just to get away from the kids and teenagers. There were all so happy, as they should be, considering how close they all were to death last night, but Joyce couldn't handle all this happiness. She was truly grateful that they were all safe, but it just reminded her that not everyone got out of last night alive.

As she lay in bed she realised this was not a good enough reason to hide in her room. She should check on Will and Jonathan and even El too. So, using every inch of self-motivation she possessed, she got out of bed.

After looking in the mirror for a few minutes, convincing herself that she was doing the right thing by not hiding in her room, she walked out. She looked down the hall and saw the door of Jonathan's room was closed. Hopper must have gone back to bed. She realised that she

would prefer to deal with Hopper right now, instead of all those happy kids.

She walked up to Jonathan's door and knocked. She didn't hear any answer and realised that Hopper was probably asleep so she started to turn away from the door, when she heard "Come in" coming from the room. She opened the door and walked in.

Hopper had been sitting on the edge on the bed since he came back to the bedroom. He knew he wasn't going to sleep but he figured El and her friends wouldn't want him lurking in the kitchen, watching their reunion.

He spent the last hour sitting on the bed doing more thinking. He thought his head would explode. He knew now that everyone knew El is alive, he'd never have any peace until he figured out a viable way for her friends to see her, without putting her in any danger. His mind was going round in circles when Joyce walked in. He couldn't figure out how to make everyone happy.

Hopper saw her coming into the room and found that he wasn't surprised, that he was actually sort of, expecting her. Dealing with grief was Hopper's specialty, after all.

"How are you holding up?" he asked her.

"How do you think?" she snapped.

Hopper didn't reply. He knew what it was like to lose someone you loved and he knew that there was nothing he could say to help her.

"I'm sorry Hop, I didn't mean to jump on you. I just don't-

"I know. You don't have to explain. Not to me."

Joyce sat next to Hopper on the bed. They both wished they had a cigarette. Hopper suddenly realised what would make Joyce feel better, even just temporarily.

"When are you going to rip me a new one for not telling you about El?" he teased. He knew she'd take the bait. Yelling at him about El would be the perfect distraction for Joyce.

Joyce paused in shock for a few seconds. With all that had happened with her own family last night, she had completely forgotten about Eleven. It only took her a few seconds to summon all her rage and fling it at Hopper.

"Don't even start me on that Hop! What the hell were you thinking? Raising a little girl, with superpowers, all by yourself, in a cabin in the woods, in secret. How did you think that would be a good idea?" she yelled, standing up to face him.

Hopper realised that he really didn't think it through when he initiated this conversation. He forgot he was talking to Joyce Byers.

"What was I supposed to do? Leave her in the woods, hunting for squirrels?" he yelled back, while standing up, mirroring Joyce.

"No, what you should have done was brought her here. Or at the very least you could have told me about her! We tell each things Hop, that's what we do! I can't believe you didn't say anything for almost a whole year! God, how often did I call you with updates on what Will was going through? And if she hadn't walked in at just the right moment, who knows when I would have found out about her!", Joyce paused to take a breath.

"And another thing, why didn't you bring her here when all this crap started? We could have figured out what to do a hell of a lot sooner!" Joyce yelled, barely taking any breaths.

"I did what I did to keep her safe!" he roared.

Joyce flinched. She wasn't expecting this reaction. She didn't realise how vulnerable he was about this.

"I just wanted to keep her safe" he said softly and sank back down on the bed.

Joyce was completely confused. She thought she saw a tear running down his cheek. Anger was one thing, but she had no idea how to deal with Hopper's boundless grief. She had never seen him like this before. So she just sat back down next to him and tried to be there for him like he was always there for her.

"I wanted to tell you so many times. And I wanted to get her help with all this stuff so many times. Maybe you're right, maybe if I had told her that Will wasn't doing well earlier, none of this would have happened, maybe Bob would still be alive, so I'm sorry for that. But it wouldn't be fair, Joyce. She's a kid, I couldn't drag her into this mess and take advantage of her magic shit, which causes her to bleed and physically hurts her by the way, just because she might know how to stop it all. It wasn't her problem to fix. Or maybe it was, I just didn't want her caught up in all this.

"And the reason I didn't tell you about all this was just to keep her safe, pure and simple. And you know how we weren't even sure if we could trust Dr. Owens. For all I knew he could still have been looking for her. And if he was looking, he'd be paying closest attention on you, and this house, because of Will. I couldn't risk it. And honestly, if you knew about El you would tell Will. And Will would tell Wheeler and I'd be getting harassed from all directions. I'm sorry about how things turned out, and if I could go back maybe I would have handled it differently. But I can't. Everything I did was to keep her safe. And alive."

Joyce waited a few minutes after his speech to reply, to make sure he was listening.

"She's not Sara."

Up until now, Hopper's face had been in his hands. He raised his head and looked at Joyce with confusion painted on his face.

"I know that."

"No you don't."

"What are you talking about? Of course she's not Sara!"

"Sara was sick. There was not you could have done to save her. Nothing. But she and El are not the same person. Maybe there are a few things you can do to save El, but it's not just on you. You don't have to do this all by yourself. And keeping her away from the world may keep her safe, but she's a child. She needs to be happy too. You screwed up this year, you made some bad decisions, but she'll get

over it. You can't blame yourself this much, you can't blame yourself for what happened to Sara, it wasn't your fault."

"And Jesus, Joyce, you know what I keep thinking about?" Hopper continued, as if Joyce hadn't started talking about Sara. "Last night, when me and El were at the lab and she was closing the gate... It was like nothing I've ever seen before, not even in a movie. She was flying, and screaming and I could see how much it was draining her but she kept going. It was... I can't even find a word to describe it."

"Jesus." was the only thing Joyce could say.

A comfortable silence descended on the pair. They were both lost in their own thoughts.

After a while Joyce realised it was her turn to get something off her chest.

"Will scared me last night. Really, really terrified me."

Hopper didn't know how to respond to that, so he just stayed silent.

"Obviously I've been worried about him and terrified for him for so long, but I've never cared about putting myself in danger. I've never been scared of being hurt myself. But I don't know, I really thought that could have been the end last night. His hands were... were squeezing my neck and I couldn't breathe and everything started to go black. And I could see were these eyes. These eyes that were my boy's eyes but... it wasn't him. They were that thing's eyes. I thought they were gonna be the last thing I'd ever see."

Throughout this speech, tears started to fall down Joyce's cheeks at a steady pace, and Hopper just put his arm around her.

"And then there were like black things, black... veins I guess, or something, sticking out from his neck and he was screaming and poor Jonathan, it was physically hurting him to see Will in so much pain, my heart was breaking, but whatever was in Will k-k-killed Bob. And I just can't... I don't know how to feel about everything. There too many things going round my head at the same time. And I don't think I'll ever forget all the things I saw last night."

Joyce broke down. Hopper broke down too, just listening to Joyce's story, and thinking of his own problems too. So they just held each other and cried.

A little while later it had seemed like they had cried out all the moisture in their bodies and gradually stopped.

"You know," Hopper began, "It's all over. All the crap that happened in the last week, the last year, it's over. And we can cry and look back and everything but we gotta remember, it's all over. It's can only go uphill from here."

This earned a short laugh from Joyce.

After all, he was right. It was over. This was the happy ending part of the story. Not the greatest happy ending, obviously, but it's not too shabby. Will was ok, El was ok, everyone was ok. Physically at least. Most of them were emotionally damaged, but they would heal. Who knows how long it would take, but they would heal.

16. Chapter 16

When Mike and Will arrived at the kitchen, they could see El, Max, Lucas, Dustin, Nancy and Jonathan were having fun together.

"Hey Mike, you just missed it, El was getting food out of the cupboards, with her mind!" Nancy smiled.

"Yeah, I've seen it Nance," he answered. "Actually, I've lived it."

This made the whole gang crack up.

"So let me get this straight, you've been staying with Hopper this whole time?" Jonathan asked. Even after everything he's seen in the last year, El was still the hardest thing for him to believe.

She nodded. The atmosphere in the kitchen changed.

"You're such a buzzkill Jonathan." Dustin muttered.

Jonathan was internally cursing himself. Of course he had to open his mouth and make things weird for everyone.

"No, it's ok to ask." El smiled at Jonathan. She liked looking at him, he was like a grown up Will. She liked both of the teenagers actually. She's always been around adults, and then she made friends with kids, but she never really crossed paths with teenagers.

Jonathan looked at her face. She was so little, around Will's age. She was basically a baby. Thinking about everything she's gone through made him sick. "Why do I feel so protective of her?" he asked himself. He figured that after last night, the big brother in him was in overdrive.

"Well that's good." Nancy said. "That you've been staying with Hopper, I mean. You've got a home now."

El smiled. Home. She had been offered lots of different homes. First with Mike at his house. Then with Papa, back at the lab. With Hopper. With Mama. With Kali. But she was starting to understand that home wasn't really a place. It was friends, family. It was a

feeling.

"And you have lots of friends now." Will added.

"No, you don't." Nancy interjected.

El was confused, had she missed something?

Mike was mentally listing all the ways he could murder Nancy for being so rude to El.

"What the hell Nancy?" said Dustin.

"What I was about to say is, you don't have friends El. You have family. Everyone here in this room is family."

El felt like she was home.

"This just got deep." muttered Dustin, which earned a few chuckles.

"Who is the boy that left earlier?" El asked.

"That was Steve." answered Mike.

"Nancy's boyfriend." Lucas continued.

"Ex." Nancy corrected him.

"Ex?" El asked.

"He's my ex-boyfriend." clarified Nancy.

"He used to be her boyfriend but he's not anymore." Max explained.

"Wait what?" asked Mike and Dustin at the same time, both pretty surprised. When did that happen? Dustin felt bad for Steve. Poor Steve.

"It's a long story, and if you stop stealing money from me, I might tell you it sometime." was Nancy's retort.

"So are you and Jonathan together now?" asked Will. He knew it would happen eventually.

"Maybe..." the two teenagers said at the same time, looking at each other with a smile.

"Does Steve know about me?" asked El, waiting to ask the question until the couple stopped gazing into each other's eyes, that sickening way the that only new couples know how to do.

"Yeah, you didn't meet him last year, but he helped fight the demogorgan. We told him about you afterwards, but he's not gonna tell anyone about you." Dustin answered, feeling the need to remind everyone that Steve is a good guy.

"So what were the tunnels like?" Nancy asked the kids. She wanted to veer the conversation away from her ex-boyfriend, if at all possible.

Mike, Max, Lucas and Dustin all answered her simultaneously.

"Cold-"

"Empty-"

"Weird-"

"Creepy-"

"They're like The Upside Down" El interrupted them all.

A painful silence fell on the group. They were all lost in their own thoughts. The kids were in the tunnels for a few minutes. They couldn't imagine being trapped their for a week, like Will. And at least they had each other. Will had nobody.

"Really?" asked Will, directing his question to El.

"Yes." she answered. She didn't need to say anything else.

"Shit" muttered Lucas to himself.

Jonathan was so glad he never went into the tunnels. He would never have been able to stop picturing Will stuck there by himself for a week. He pictured it all the time anyway, but it would feel a lot more disturbingly real if he had seen it for himself.

"It wasn't all bad though. Dustin tripped and totally overreacted. It would have been funny if we hadn't been on a life-threatening mission." remembered Max.

This made everyone laugh, imagining Dustin being a drama queen even when things were so serious. This led to funny stories about getting Steve into Billy's car and driving to the hole Hopper made. Which led to stories about dumping Billy's unconscious body on Max's doorstep.

Everyone in the kitchen was laughing so hard that an outsider wouldn't realise that they had all gone through life-changing, traumatic events just a few hours ago.

"So Steve just woke up in the car that Max was driving, surrounded by you guys?" Jonathan was incredulous but still found it hysterical. He didn't know how he felt about Steve but he figured he could sort out all that emotional crap some other time.

"Yep. And there was a lot screaming involved." said Mike, in between bouts of laughter.

Will couldn't believe he kept missing all the fun stuff with his friends. "Dustin, why did you put bandages on him before you all lifted him into the car?"

"Because I thought it might make him feel better..." Dustin's voice trailed off, realising now how ridiculous it was seeing as they had more important things to do at the time.

Everyone continued to laugh uncontrollably.

"Billy really beat the crap out of him. It was like something in a movie" Mike only realised after saying this that a lot of things that happened last night were like things in a movie. This thought put a stop to that carefree laughter.

"So Billy just walked in here and started throwing punches?" Jonathan asked. He never really met Billy but he still thought that was weird.

"Well..." Dustin didn't know how to respond.

"No, actually..." Mike knew it wasn't really his story to tell.

"He has a problem with Lucas, for whatever reason. Most likely he just has a problem with me having friends." Max wasn't sure how much information to give everyone. "So when he saw Lucas here he flipped out and was gonna beat the crap out of him and that's when Steve stopped him."

Everyone silently realised that Billy's "problem" with Lucas was probably something to do with the colour of his skin. But nobody really felt the need to state it out loud.

"I was so scared- like exactly as scared as I was when we were surrounded by demodogs in the junkyard. Which seems kinda stupid now because obviously the demodogs are scarier than Billy..." Lucas felt so weak and pathetic. He wasn't able to protect himself when Billy grabbed him, and more importantly, he wasn't able to protect Max. Not that she needed protection, but still.

Even now, reliving what happened, he felt so ashamed. It was one thing to be terrified when face-to-face with a monster from another dimension, but he shouldn't have been that scared of an eighteen year old boy. He also felt totally humiliated that the reason he was targeted by Billy was because of his skin colour.

Nancy could see how embarrassed Lucas was, it was written all over his face and wanted to help. "I've seen Billy angry with Steve. Definitely as scary as those demodogs."

"I'd take demodogs over Billy any day" Max emphatically agreed with Nancy.

Soon Mike and Dustin were talking over one another about how scared they were too.

"Yeah, but you guys don't get it." Lucas said to everyone. "I thought he was going to kill me."

Max grabbed Lucas' hand. "I know what that feels like."

Lucas suddenly didn't feel as embarrassed or alone anymore. Or scared. He knew Max would protect him.

As Lucas looked around at the other people in this group, the people who had gone silent because they didn't know what else to say, he knew they would protect him too.

"Where were you guys for the last few days?" Mike asked Nancy and Jonathan.

They looked at each other, deciding whether to tell them about Murray Bauman or not.

"Barb's parents hired a P.I. to find Barb. This guy is crazy good and figured out lots of what happened last year. Kinda. He had some of his facts wrong but he knew about Eleven-" Jonathan explained.

"-El." Mike interrupted.

"What?"

"Don't call her Eleven, she's not some experiment number. Her name is El."

El smiled at Mike for realising how much she hated being called Eleven. The smile made Mike's legs turn to jelly.

"Right, ok. This P.I., Murray, knew about El. It sucked watching Barb's parents being so hopeful about finding her and I wanted to tell them the truth but I also wanted to make sure the bastards in the lab got what was coming to them. So we told him everything that happened." Nancy continued.

Jonathan took over. "We helped him write a story about what happened here last year, except we made it a lot more believable. The story is going to be published and the lab's reputation is going to be destroyed."

"And Barb's parents can have some closure. We all can." added Nancy.

"But I thought we weren't allowed to tell anyone?" Max was still confused about the rules of this club.

"Well, Murray just said he had "anonymous sources" in the article, and because the facts in the article are so watered down and not

100% true, we should be ok."

"Screw the lab." El said aloud to herself, trying some of the lingo she picked up in Chicago.

She didn't realise she had said it out loud until everyone else started laughing, shocked by El's comment.

"Screw the lab!" they all repeated together.

17. Chapter 17

It took quite a while, but eventually Joyce and Hopper summoned the strength to leave the comfort of Jonathan's bedroom. They walked to the kitchen to find all the kids and teenagers talking to each other. It was nice. Normal. It made Joyce happy to watch.

"What are you kids up to?" she asked them all. She was still in pain but she had so much to be thankful for, so she decided to power through her heart break and anxiety for the sake of these kids, these brave, strong kids.

"Nothing much." Jonathan answered. At this point the big group had divided into smaller groups. Nancy was talking to Will and Max, Jonathan was talking to Mike and Lucas and El and Dustin were having their own conversation.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" Joyce asked her eldest child.

"Uhm, sure.." Jonathan could only imagine how his mother was feeling and hoped he would be able to say the right thing.

They walked to the corner of the kitchen so they could have some privacy, leaving Hopper to get himself a cup of coffee.

"Are you ok?" asked Joyce.

"Yeah of course, are you ok?"

"Forget about me Jonathan, it's not your job to worry about me, it's my job to worry about you. Now, are you ok?"

Jonathan shrugged his shoulders. He didn't think he would ever stop hearing Will's screams of pure agony in the back of his head.

"I'm sorry about last night, I'm sorry you were there and had to see all that. I know you Jonathan, and I know that you won't be able to stop thinking about what happened in the cabin for a long time. I won't be able to stop thinking about it either, so don't be afraid to come to me to talk about it- or not talk about it if you want to, if you need to. You are my son too. And I know it seems like all I care about is Will

and it seems like I forget about you sometimes, but it's only because you're always so dependable. But you don't have to be dependable. You don't have to be some father figure for Will, you're allowed to just be a stupid teenager. And I am here for you."

Joyce hugged her son and felt him cry into her shoulder. She felt herself cry into his shoulder. They stayed there for a few minutes like that. They couldn't remember the last time it had been just the two of them.

They finally snapped out of it.

"So, you and Nancy, huh?" she teased, trying to lighten the conversation.

"Whatever" he rolled his eyes as he laughed.

"Really though, I'm happy you two found each other. I'm happy you're happy." She was so proud of her little boy, who was all grown up, not so little anymore.

Jonathan couldn't suppress a smile. Things were truly looking up. Nancy is his girlfriend, Will is safe. There was only one person he was still worried about.

"What about you Mom, are you ok?"

"No. No I'm not." she answered him honestly, tears still streaming down her face. "But I think I will be. Eventually."